

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, were good enough for me,
To speak of woe that is in all marriage;
For, masters, since I was twelve years of age,
Thanks be to God Who is for aye alive,
Of husbands at church door have I had five;
For men so many times have wedded me;
And all were worthy men in their degree.
But someone told me not so long ago
That since Our Lord, save once, would never go
To wedding (that at Cana in Galilee),
Thus, by this same example, showed He me
I never should have married more than once.
Lo and behold! What sharp words, for the nonce,
Beside a well Lord Jesus, God and man,
Spoke in reproving the Samaritan:
'For thou hast had five husbands,' thus said He,
'And he whom thou hast now to be with thee
Is not thine husband.' Thus He said that day,
But what He meant thereby I cannot say;
And I would ask now why that same fifth man
Was not husband to the Samaritan?
How many might she have, then, in marriage?
For I have never heard, in all my age,
Clear exposition of this number shown,
Though men may guess and argue up and down.
But well I know and say, and do not lie,
God bade us to increase and multiply;
That worthy text can I well understand.
And well I know He said, too, my husband
Should father leave, and mother, and cleave to me;
But no specific number mentioned He,
Whether of bigamy or octogamy;
Why should men speak of it reproachfully?
Lo, there's the wise old king Dan Solomon;
I understand he had more wives than one;
And now would God it were permitted me
To be refreshed one half as oft as he!
Which gift of God he had for all his wives!

No man has such that in this world now lives.
God knows, this noble king, it strikes my wit,
The first night he had many a merry fit
With each of them, so much he was alive!
Praise be to God that I have wedded five!
Of whom I did pick out and choose the best
Both for their nether purse and for their chest
Different schools make divers perfect clerks,
Different methods learned in sundry works
Make the good workman perfect, certainly.
Of full five husbands tutoring am I.
Welcome the sixth whenever come he shall.
Forsooth, I'll not keep chaste for good and all;
When my good husband from the world is gone,
Some Christian man shall marry me anon;
For then, the apostle says that I am free
To wed, in God's name, where it pleases me.
He says that to be wedded is no sin;
Better to marry than to burn within.
What care I though folk speak reproachfully
Of wicked Lamech and his bigamy?
I know well Abraham was holy man,
And Jacob, too, as far as know I can;
And each of them had spouses more than two;
And many another holy man also.
Or can you say that you have ever heard
That God has ever by His express word
Marriage forbidden? Pray you, now, tell me.
Or where commanded He virginity?
I read as well as you no doubt have read
The apostle when he speaks of maidenhead;
He said, commandment of the Lord he'd none.
Men may advise a woman to be one,
But such advice is not commandment, no;
He left the thing to our own judgment so.
For had Lord God commanded maidenhood,
He'd have condemned all marriage as not good;
And certainly, if there were no seed sown,
Virginity- where then should it be grown?
Paul dared not to forbid us, at the least,
A thing whereof his Master'd no behest.

The dart is set up for virginity;
 Catch it who can; who runs best let us see.
 "But this word is not meant for every wight,
 But where God wills to give it, of His might.
 I know well that the apostle was a maid;
 Nevertheless, and though he wrote and said
 He would that everyone were such as he,
 All is not counsel to virginity;
 And so to be a wife he gave me leave
 Out of permission; there's no shame should grieve
 In marrying me, if that my mate should die,
 Without exception, too, of bigamy.
 And though 'twere good no woman flesh to touch,
 He meant, in his own bed or on his couch;
 For peril 'tis fire and tow to assemble;
 You know what this example may resemble.
 This is the sum: he held virginity
 Nearer perfection than marriage for frailty.
 And frailty's all, I say, save he and she
 Would lead their lives throughout in chastity.
 "I grant this well, I have no great envy
 Though maidenhood's preferred to bigamy;
 Let those who will be clean, body and ghost,
 Of my condition I will make no boast.
 For well you know, a lord in his household,
 He has not every vessel all of gold;
 Some are of wood and serve well all their days.
 God calls folk unto Him in sundry ways,
 And each one has from God a proper gift,
 Some this, some that, as pleases Him to shift.
 "Virginity is great perfection known,
 And continence e'en with devotion shown.
 But Christ, Who of perfection is the well,
 Bade not each separate man he should go sell
 All that he had and give it to the poor
 And follow Him in such wise going before.
 He spoke to those that would live perfectly;
 And, masters, by your leave, such am not I.
 I will devote the flower of all my age
 To all the acts and harvests of marriage.
 "Tell me also, to what purpose or end

The genitals were made, that I defend,
 And for what benefit was man first wrought?
 Trust you right well, they were not made for naught.
 Explain who will and argue up and down
 That they were made for passing out, as known,
 Of urine, and our two belongings small
 Were just to tell a female from a male,
 And for no other cause- ah, say you no?
 Experience knows well it is not so;
 And, so the clerics be not with me wroth,
 I say now that they have been made for both,
 That is to say, for duty and for ease
 In getting, when we do not God displease.
 Why should men otherwise in their books set
 That man shall pay unto his wife his debt?
 Now wherewith should he ever make payment,
 Except he used his blessed instrument?
 Then on a creature were devised these things
 For urination and engenderings.
 "But I say not that every one is bound,
 Who's fitted out and furnished as I've found,
 To go and use it to beget an heir;
 Then men would have for chastity no care.
 Christ was a maid, and yet shaped like a man,
 And many a saint, since this old world began,
 Yet has lived ever in perfect chastity.
 I bear no malice to virginity;
 Let such be bread of purest white wheat-seed,
 And let us wives be called but barley bread;
 And yet with barley bread (if Mark you scan)
 Jesus Our Lord refreshed full many a man.
 In such condition as God places us
 I'll persevere, I'm not fastidious.
 In wifehood I will use my instrument
 As freely as my Maker has it sent.
 If I be niggardly, God give me sorrow!
 My husband he shall have it, eve and morrow,
 When he's pleased to come forth and pay his debt.
 I'll not delay, a husband I will get
 Who shall be both my debtor and my thrall
 And have his tribulations therewithal

Upon his flesh, the while I am his wife.
 I have the power during all my life
 Over his own good body, and not he.
 For thus the apostle told it unto me;
 And bade our husbands that they love us well.
 And all this pleases me whereof I tell."
 Up rose the pardoner, and that anon.
 "Now dame," said he, "by God and by Saint John,
 You are a noble preacher in this case!
 I was about to wed a wife, alas!
 Why should I buy this on my flesh so dear?
 No, I would rather wed no wife this year."
 "But wait," said she, "my tale is not begun;
 Nay, you shall drink from out another tun
 Before I cease, and savour worse than ale.
 And when I shall have told you all my tale
 Of tribulation that is in marriage,
 Whereof I've been an expert all my age,
 That is to say, myself have been the whip,
 Then may you choose whether you will go sip
 Out of that very tun which I shall broach.
 Beware of it ere you too near approach;
 For I shall give examples more than ten.
 Whoso will not be warned by other men
 By him shall other men corrected be,
 The self-same words has written Ptolemy;
 Read in his *Almagest* and find it there."
 "Lady, I pray you, if your will it were,"
 Spoke up this pardoner, "as you began,
 Tell forth your tale, nor spare for any man,
 And teach us younger men of your technique."
 "Gladly," said she, "since it may please, not pique.
 But yet I pray of all this company
 That if I speak from my own phantasy,
 They will not take amiss the things I say;
 For my intention's only but to play.
 "Now, sirs, now will I tell you forth my tale.
 And as I may drink ever wine and ale,
 I will tell truth of husbands that I've had,
 For three of them were good and two were bad.
 The three were good men and were rich and old.

Not easily could they the promise hold
 Whereby they had been bound to cherish me.
 You know well what I mean by that, pardie!
 So help me God, I laugh now when I think
 How pitifully by night I made them swink;
 And by my faith I set by it no store.
 They'd given me their gold, and treasure more;
 I needed not do longer diligence
 To win their love, or show them reverence.
 They all loved me so well, by God above,
 I never did set value on their love!
 A woman wise will strive continually
 To get herself loved, when she's not, you see.
 But since I had them wholly in my hand,
 And since to me they'd given all their land,
 Why should I take heed, then, that I should please,
 Save it were for my profit or my ease?
 I set them so to work, that, by my fay,
 Full many a night they sighed out 'Welaway!'
 The bacon was not brought them home, I trow,
 That some men have in Essex at Dunmowe.
 I governed them so well, by my own law,
 That each of them was happy as a daw,
 And fain to bring me fine things from the fair.
 And they were right glad when I spoke them fair;
 For God knows that I nagged them mercilessly.
 "Now hearken how I bore me properly,
 All you wise wives that well can understand.
 "Thus shall you speak and wrongfully demand;
 For half so brazenfacedly can no man
 Swear to his lying as a woman can.
 I say not this to wives who may be wise,
 Except when they themselves do misadvise.
 A wise wife, if she knows what's for her good,
 Will swear the crow is mad, and in this mood
 Call up for witness to it her own maid;
 But hear me now, for this is what I said.
 "'Sir Dotard, is it thus you stand today?
 Why is my neighbour's wife so fine and gay?
 She's honoured over all where'er she goes;
 I sit at home, I have no decent clo'es.

What do you do there at my neighbour's house?
 Is she so fair? Are you so amorous?
 Why whisper to our maid? Benedicite!
 Sir Lecher old, let your seductions be!
 And if I have a gossip or a friend,
 Innocently, you blame me like a fiend
 If I but walk, for company, to his house!
 You come home here as drunken as a mouse,
 And preach there on your bench, a curse on you!
 You tell me it's a great misfortune, too,
 To wed a girl who costs more than she's worth;
 And if she's rich and of a higher birth,
 You say it's torment to abide her folly
 And put up with her pride and melancholy.
 And if she be right fair, you utter knave,
 You say that every lecher will her have;
 She may no while in chastity abide
 That is assailed by all and on each side.
 "You say, some men desire us for our gold,
 Some for our shape and some for fairness told:
 And some, that she can either sing or dance,
 And some, for courtesy and dalliance;
 Some for her hands and for her arms so small;
 Thus all goes to the devil in your tale.
 You say men cannot keep a castle wall
 That's long assailed on all sides, and by all.
 "And if that she be foul, you say that she
 Hankers for every man that she may see;
 For like a spaniel will she leap on him
 Until she finds a man to be victim;
 And not a grey goose swims there in the lake
 But finds a gander willing her to take.
 You say, it is a hard thing to enfold
 Her whom no man will in his own arms hold.
 This say you, worthless, when you go to bed;
 And that no wise man needs thus to be wed,
 No, nor a man that hearkens unto Heaven.
 With furious thunder-claps and fiery levin
 May your thin, withered, wrinkled neck be broke:
 "You say that dripping eaves, and also smoke,
 And wives contentious, will make men to flee

Out of their houses; ah, benedicite!
 What ails such an old fellow so to chide?
 "You say that all we wives our vices hide
 Till we are married, then we show them well;
 That is a scoundrel's proverb, let me tell!
 "You say that oxen, asses, horses, hounds
 Are tried out variously, and on good grounds;
 Basins and bowls, before men will them buy,
 And spoons and stools and all such goods you try.
 And so with pots and clothes and all array;
 But of their wives men get no trial, you say,
 Till they are married, base old dotard you!
 And then we show what evil we can do.
 "You say also that it displeases me
 Unless you praise and flatter my beauty,
 And save you gaze always upon my face
 And call me "lovely lady" every place;
 And save you make a feast upon that day
 When I was born, and give me garments gay;
 And save due honour to my nurse is paid
 As well as to my faithful chambermaid,
 And to my father's folk and his allies-
 Thus you go on, old barrel full of lies!
 "And yet of our apprentice, young Jenkin,
 For his crisp hair, showing like gold so fine,
 Because he squires me walking up and down,
 A false suspicion in your mind is sown;
 I'd give him naught, though you were dead tomorrow.
 "But tell me this, why do you hide, with sorrow,
 The keys to your strong-box away from me?
 It is my gold as well as yours, pardie.
 Why would you make an idiot of your dame?
 Now by Saint James, but you shall miss your aim,
 You shall not be, although like mad you scold,
 Master of both my body and my gold;
 One you'll forgo in spite of both your eyes;
 Why need you seek me out or set on spies?
 I think you'd like to lock me in your chest!
 You should say: "Dear wife, go where you like best,
 Amuse yourself, I will believe no tales;
 You're my wife Alis true, and truth prevails."

We love no man that guards us or gives charge
 Of where we go, for we will be at large.
 "'Of all men the most blessed may he be,
 That wise astrologer, Dan Ptolemy,
 Who says this proverb in his Almagest:
 "Of all men he's in wisdom the highest
 That nothing cares who has the world in hand."
 And by this proverb shall you understand:
 Since you've enough, why do you reck or care
 How merrily all other folks may fare?
 For certainly, old dotard, by your leave,
 You shall have cunt all right enough at eve.
 He is too much a niggard who's so tight
 That from his lantern he'll give none a light.
 For he'll have never the less light, by gad;
 Since you've enough, you need not be so sad.
 "'You say, also, that if we make us gay
 With clothing, all in costliest array,
 That it's a danger to our chastity;
 And you must back the saying up, pardie!
 Repeating these words in the apostle's name:
 "In habits meet for chastity, not shame,
 Your women shall be garmented," said he,
 "And not with broidered hair, or jewellery,
 Or pearls, or gold, or costly gowns and chic;"
 After your text and after your rubric
 I will not follow more than would a gnat.
 You said this, too, that I was like a cat;
 For if one care to singe a cat's furred skin,
 Then would the cat remain the house within;
 And if the cat's coat be all sleek and gay,
 She will not keep in house a half a day,
 But out she'll go, ere dawn of any day,
 To show her skin and caterwaul and play.
 This is to say, if I'm a little gay,
 To show my rags I'll gad about all day.
 "'Sir Ancient Fool, what ails you with your spies?
 Though you pray Argus, with his hundred eyes,
 To be my body-guard and do his best,
 Faith, he sha'n't hold me, save I am modest;
 I could delude him easily- trust me!

"'You said, also, that there are three things- three-
 The which things are a trouble on this earth,
 And that no man may ever endure the fourth:
 O dear Sir Rogue, may Christ cut short your life!
 Yet do you preach and say a hateful wife
 Is to be reckoned one of these mischances.
 Are there no other kinds of resemblances
 That you may liken thus your parables to,
 But must a hapless wife be made to do?
 "'You liken woman's love to very Hell,
 To desert land where waters do not well.
 You liken it, also, unto wildfire;
 The more it burns, the more it has desire
 To consume everything that burned may be.
 You say that just as worms destroy a tree,
 Just so a wife destroys her own husband;
 Men know this who are bound in marriage band.'
 "Masters, like this, as you must understand,
 Did I my old men charge and censure, and
 Claim that they said these things in drunkenness;
 And all was false, but yet I took witness
 Of Jenkin and of my dear niece also.
 O Lord, the pain I gave them and the woe,
 All guiltless, too, by God's grief exquisite!
 For like a stallion could I neigh and bite.
 I could complain, though mine was all the guilt,
 Or else, full many a time, I'd lost the tilt.
 Whoso comes first to mill first gets meal ground;
 I whimpered first and so did them confound.
 They were right glad to hasten to excuse
 Things they had never done, save in my ruse.
 "With wenches would I charge him, by this hand,
 When, for some illness, he could hardly stand.
 Yet tickled this the heart of him, for he
 Deemed it was love produced such jealousy.
 I swore that all my walking out at night
 Was but to spy on girls he kept outright;
 And under cover of that I had much mirth.
 For all such wit is given us at birth;
 Deceit, weeping, and spinning, does God give
 To women, naturally, the while they live.

And thus of one thing I speak boastfully,
 I got the best of each one, finally,
 By trick, or force, or by some kind of thing,
 As by continual growls or murmuring;
 Especially in bed had they mischance,
 There would I chide and give them no pleasance;
 I would no longer in the bed abide
 If I but felt his arm across my side,
 Till he had paid his ransom unto me;
 Then would I let him do his nicety.
 And therefore to all men this tale I tell,
 Let gain who may, for everything's to sell.
 With empty hand men may no falcons lure;
 For profit would I all his lust endure,
 And make for him a well-feigned appetite;
 Yet I in bacon never had delight;
 And that is why I used so much to chide.
 For if the pope were seated there beside
 I'd not have spared them, no, at their own board.
 For by my truth, I paid them, word for word.
 So help me the True God Omnipotent,
 Though I right now should make my testament,
 I owe them not a word that was not quit.
 I brought it so about, and by my wit,
 That they must give it up, as for the best,
 Or otherwise we'd never have had rest.
 For though he glared and scowled like lion mad,
 Yet failed he of the end he wished he had.
 "Then would I say: 'Good dearie, see you keep
 In mind how meek is Wilkin, our old sheep;
 Come near, my spouse, come let me kiss your cheek!
 You should be always patient, aye, and meek,
 And have a sweetly scrupulous tenderness,
 Since you so preach of old Job's patience, yes.
 Suffer always, since you so well can preach;
 And, save you do, be sure that we will teach
 That it is well to leave a wife in peace.
 One of us two must bow, to be at ease;
 And since a man's more reasonable, they say,
 Than woman is, you must have patience aye.
 What ails you that you grumble thus and groan?

Is it because you'd have my cunt alone?
 Why take it all, lo, have it every bit;
 Peter! Beshrew you but you're fond of it!
 For if I would go peddle my belle chose,
 I could walk out as fresh as is a rose;
 But I will keep it for your own sweet tooth.
 You are to blame, by God I tell the truth.'
 "Such were the words I had at my command.
 Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.
 "My fourth husband, he was a reveller,
 That is to say, he kept a paramour;
 And young and full of passion then was I,
 Stubborn and strong and jolly as a pie.
 Well could I dance to tune of harp, nor fail
 To sing as well as any nightingale
 When I had drunk a good draught of sweet wine.
 Metellius, the foul churl and the swine,
 Did with a staff deprive his wife of life
 Because she drank wine; had I been his wife
 He never should have frightened me from drink;
 For after wine, of Venus must I think:
 For just as surely as cold produces hail,
 A liquorish mouth must have a lickerish tail.
 In women wine's no bar of impotence,
 This know all lechers by experience.
 "But Lord Christ! When I do remember me
 Upon my youth and on my jollity,
 It tickles me about my heart's deep root.
 To this day does my heart sing in salute
 That I have had my world in my own time.
 But age, alas! that poisons every prime,
 Has taken away my beauty and my pith;
 Let go, farewell, the devil go therewith!
 The flour is gone, there is no more to tell,
 The bran, as best I may, must I now sell;
 But yet to be right merry I'll try, and
 Now will I tell you of my fourth husband.
 "I say that in my heart I'd great despite
 When he of any other had delight.
 But he was quit by God and by Saint Joce!
 I made, of the same wood, a staff most gross;

Not with my body and in manner foul,
 But certainly I showed so gay a soul
 That in his own thick grease I made him fry
 For anger and for utter jealousy.
 By God, on earth I was his purgatory,
 For which I hope his soul lives now in glory.
 For God knows, many a time he sat and sung
 When the shoe bitterly his foot had wrung.
 There was no one, save God and he, that knew
 How, in so many ways, I'd twist the screw.
 He died when I came from Jerusalem,
 And lies entombed beneath the great rood-beam,
 Although his tomb is not so glorious
 As was the sepulchre of Darius,
 The which Apelles wrought full cleverly;
 'Twas waste to bury him expensively.
 Let him fare well. God give his soul good rest,
 He now is in the grave and in his chest.
 "And now of my fifth husband will I tell.
 God grant his soul may never get to Hell!
 And yet he was to me most brutal, too;
 My ribs yet feel as they were black and blue,
 And ever shall, until my dying day.
 But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
 And therewithal he could so well impose,
 What time he wanted use of my belle chose,
 That though he'd beaten me on every bone,
 He could re-win my love, and that full soon.
 I guess I loved him best of all, for he
 Gave of his love most sparingly to me.
 We women have, if I am not to lie,
 In this love matter, a quaint fantasy;
 Look out a thing we may not lightly have,
 And after that we'll cry all day and crave.
 Forbid a thing, and that thing covet we;
 Press hard upon us, then we turn and flee.
 Sparingly offer we our goods, when fair;
 Great crowds at market for dearer ware,
 And what's too common brings but little price;
 All this knows every woman who is wise.
 "My fifth husband, may God his spirit bless!

Whom I took all for love, and not riches,
 Had been sometime a student at Oxford,
 And had left school and had come home to board
 With my best gossip, dwelling in our town,
 God save her soul! Her name was Alison.
 She knew my heart and all my privy
 Better than did our parish priest, s'help me!
 To her confided I my secrets all.
 For had my husband pissed against a wall,
 Or done a thing that might have cost his life,
 To her and to another worthy wife,
 And to my niece whom I loved always well,
 I would have told it- every bit I'd tell,
 And did so, many and many a time, God wot,
 Which made his face full often red and hot
 For utter shame; he blamed himself that he
 Had told me of so deep a privy.
 "So it befell that on a time, in Lent
 (For oftentimes I to my gossip went,
 Since I loved always to be glad and gay
 And to walk out, in March, April, and May,
 From house to house, to hear the latest malice),
 Jenkin the clerk, and my gossip Dame Alis,
 And I myself into the meadows went.
 My husband was in London all that Lent;
 I had the greater leisure, then, to play,
 And to observe, and to be seen, I say,
 By pleasant folk; what knew I where my face
 Was destined to be loved, or in what place?
 Therefore I made my visits round about
 To vigils and processions of devout,
 To preaching too, and shrines of pilgrimage,
 To miracle plays, and always to each marriage,
 And wore my scarlet skirt before all wights.
 These worms and all these moths and all these mites,
 I say it at my peril, never ate;
 And know you why? I wore it early and late.
 "Now will I tell you what befell to me.
 I say that in the meadows walked we three
 Till, truly, we had come to such dalliance,
 This clerk and I, that, of my vigilance,

I spoke to him and told him how that he,
 Were I a widow, might well marry me.
 For certainly I say it not to brag,
 But I was never quite without a bag
 Full of the needs of marriage that I seek.
 I hold a mouse's heart not worth a leek
 That has but one hole into which to run,
 And if it fail of that, then all is done.
 "I made him think he had enchanted me;
 My mother taught me all that subtlety.
 And then I said I'd dreamed of him all night,
 He would have slain me as I lay upright,
 And all my bed was full of very blood;
 But yet I hoped that he would do me good,
 For blood betokens gold, as I was taught.
 And all was false, I dreamed of him just- naught,
 Save as I acted on my mother's lore,
 As well in this thing as in many more.
 "But now, let's see, what was I going to say?
 Aha, by God, I know! It goes this way.
 "When my fourth husband lay upon his bier,
 I wept enough and made but sorry cheer,
 As wives must always, for it's custom's grace,
 And with my kerchief covered up my face;
 But since I was provided with a mate,
 I really wept but little, I may state.
 "To church my man was borne upon the morrow
 By neighbours, who for him made signs of sorrow;
 And Jenkin, our good clerk, was one of them.
 So help me God, when rang the requiem
 After the bier, I thought he had a pair
 Of legs and feet so clean-cut and so fair
 That all my heart I gave to him to hold.
 He was, I think, but twenty winters old,
 And I was forty, if I tell the truth;
 But then I always had a young colt's tooth.
 Gap-toothed I was, and that became me well;
 I had the print of holy Venus' seal.
 So help me God, I was a healthy one,
 And fair and rich and young and full of fun;
 And truly, as my husbands all told me,

I had the silkiest quoniam that could be.
 For truly, I am all Venusian
 In feeling, and my brain is Martian.
 Venus gave me my lust, my lickerishness,
 And Mars gave me my sturdy hardiness.
 Taurus was my ascendant, with Mars therein.
 Alas, alas, that ever love was sin!
 I followed always my own inclination
 By virtue of my natal constellation;
 Which wrought me so I never could withdraw
 My Venus-chamber from a good fellow.
 Yet have I Mars's mark upon my face,
 And also in another private place.
 For God so truly my salvation be
 As I have never loved for policy,
 But ever followed my own appetite,
 Though he were short or tall, or black or white;
 I took no heed, so that he cared for me,
 How poor he was, nor even of what degree.
 "What should I say now, save, at the month's end,
 This jolly, gentle, Jenkin clerk, my friend,
 Had wedded me full ceremoniously,
 And to him gave I all the land in fee
 That ever had been given me before;
 But, later I repented me full sore.
 He never suffered me to have my way.
 By God, he smote me on the ear, one day,
 Because I tore out of his book a leaf,
 So that from this my ear is grown quite deaf.
 Stubborn I was as is a lioness,
 And with my tongue a very jay, I guess,
 And walk I would, as I had done before,
 From house to house, though I should not, he swore.
 For which he oftentimes would sit and preach
 And read old Roman tales to me and teach
 How one Sulpicius Gallus left his wife
 And her forsook for term of all his life
 Because he saw her with bared head, I say,
 Looking out from his door, upon a day.
 "Another Roman told he of by name
 Who, since his wife was at a summer-game

Without his knowing, he forsook her eke.
 And then would he within his Bible seek
 That proverb of the old Ecclesiast
 Where he commands so freely and so fast
 That man forbid his wife to gad about;
 Then would he thus repeat, with never doubt:
 'Whoso would build his whole house out of shallows,
 And spur his blind horse to run over fallows,
 And let his wife alone go seeking hallows,
 Is worthy to be hanged upon the gallows.'
 But all for naught, I didn't care a haw
 For all his proverbs, nor for his old saw,
 Nor yet would I by him corrected be.
 I hate one that my vices tells to me,
 And so do more of us- God knows!- than I.
 This made him mad with me, and furiously,
 That I'd not yield to him in any case.
 "Now will I tell you truth, by Saint Thomas,
 Of why I tore from out his book a leaf,
 For which he struck me so it made me deaf.
 "He had a book that gladly, night and day,
 For his amusement he would read alway.
 He called it 'Theophrastus' and 'Valerius',
 At which book would he laugh, uproarious.
 And, too, there sometime was a clerk at Rome,
 A cardinal, that men called Saint Jerome,
 Who made a book against Jovinian;
 In which book, too, there was Tertullian,
 Chrysippus, Trotula, and Heloise
 Who was abbess near Paris' diocese;
 And too, the Proverbs of King Solomon,
 And Ovid's Art, and books full many a one.
 And all of these were bound in one volume.
 And every night and day 'twas his custom,
 When he had leisure and took some vacation
 From all his other worldly occupation,
 To read, within this book, of wicked wives.
 He knew of them more legends and more lives
 Than are of good wives written in the Bible.
 For trust me, it's impossible, no libel,
 That any cleric shall speak well of wives,

Unless it be of saints and holy lives,
 But naught for other women will they do.
 Who painted first the lion, tell me who?
 By God, if women had but written stories,
 As have these clerks within their oratories,
 They would have written of men more wickedness
 Than all the race of Adam could redress.
 The children of Mercury and of Venus
 Are in their lives antagonistic thus;
 For Mercury loves wisdom and science,
 And Venus loves but pleasure and expense.
 Because they different dispositions own,
 Each falls when other's in ascendant shown.
 And God knows Mercury is desolate
 In Pisces, wherein Venus rules in state;
 And Venus falls when Mercury is raised;
 Therefore no woman by a clerk is praised.
 A clerk, when he is old and can naught do
 Of Venus' labours worth his worn-out shoe,
 Then sits he down and writes, in his dotage,
 That women cannot keep vow of marriage!
 "But now to tell you, as I started to,
 Why I was beaten for a book, pardieu.
 Upon a night Jenkin, who was our sire,
 Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,
 Of Mother Eve who, by her wickedness,
 First brought mankind to all his wretchedness,
 For which Lord Jesus Christ Himself was slain,
 Who, with His heart's blood, saved us thus again.
 Lo here, expressly of woman, may you find
 That woman was the ruin of mankind.
 "Then read he out how Samson lost his hairs,
 Sleeping, his leman cut them with her shears;
 And through this treason lost he either eye.
 "Then read he out, if I am not to lie,
 Of Hercules, and Deianira's desire
 That caused him to go set himself on fire.
 "Nothing escaped him of the pain and woe
 That Socrates had with his spouses two;
 How Xantippe threw piss upon his head;
 This hapless man sat still, as he were dead;

He wiped his head, no more durst he complain
 Than 'Ere the thunder ceases comes the rain.'
 "Then of Pasiphae, the queen of Crete,
 For cursedness he thought the story sweet;
 Fie! Say no more- it is an awful thing-
 Of her so horrible lust and love-liking.
 "Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery,
 Who caused her husband's death by treachery,
 He read all this with greatest zest, I vow.
 "He told me, too, just when it was and how
 Amphiarus at Thebes lost his life;
 My husband had a legend of his wife
 Eriphyle who, for a brooch of gold,
 In secrecy to hostile Greeks had told
 Whereat her husband had his hiding place,
 For which he found at Thebes but sorry grace.
 "Of Livia and Lucia told he me,
 For both of them their husbands killed, you see,
 The one for love, the other killed for hate;
 Livia her husband, on an evening late,
 Made drink some poison, for she was his foe.
 Lucia, lecherous, loved her husband so
 That, to the end he'd always of her think,
 She gave him such a, philtre, for love-drink,
 That he was dead or ever it was morrow;
 And husbands thus, by same means, came to sorrow.
 "Then did he tell how one Latumius
 Complained unto his comrade Arrius
 That in his garden grew a baleful tree
 Whereon, he said, his wives, and they were three,
 Had hanged themselves for wretchedness and woe.
 'O brother,' Arrius said, 'and did they so?
 Give me a graft of that same blessed tree
 And in my garden planted it shall be!'
 "Of wives of later date he also read,
 How some had slain their husbands in their bed
 And let their lovers shag them all the night
 While corpses lay upon the floor upright.
 And some had driven nails into the brain
 While husbands slept and in such wise were slain.
 And some had given them poison in their drink.

He told more evil than the mind can think.
 And therewithal he knew of more proverbs
 Than in this world there grows of grass or herbs.
 'Better,' he said, 'your habitation be
 With lion wild or dragon foul,' said he,
 'Than with a woman who will nag and chide.'
 'Better,' he said, 'on the housetop abide
 Than with a brawling wife down in the house;
 Such are so wicked and contrarious
 They hate the thing their husband loves, for aye.'
 He said, 'a woman throws her shame away
 When she throws off her smock,' and further, too:
 'A woman fair, save she be chaste also,
 Is like a ring of gold in a sow's nose.'
 Who would imagine or who would suppose
 What grief and pain were in this heart of mine?
 "And when I saw he'd never cease, in fine,
 His reading in this cursed book at night,
 Three leaves of it I snatched and tore outright
 Out of his book, as he read on; and eke
 I with my fist so took him on the cheek
 That in our fire he reeled and fell right down.
 Then he got up as does a wild lion,
 And with his fist he struck me on the head,
 And on the floor I lay as I were dead.
 And when he saw how limp and still I lay,
 He was afraid and would have run away,
 Until at last, out of my swoon I made:
 'Oh, have you slain me, you false thief?' I said,
 'And for my land have you thus murdered me?
 Kiss me before I die, and let me be.'
 "He came to me and near me he knelt down,
 And said: 'O my dear sister Alison,
 So help me God, I'll never strike you more;
 What I have done, you are to blame therefor.
 But all the same forgiveness now I seek!'
 And thereupon I hit him on the cheek,
 And said: 'Thief, so much vengeance do I wreak!
 Now will I die; I can no longer speak!'
 But at the last, and with much care and woe,
 We made it up between ourselves. And so

He put the bridle reins within my hand
 To have the governing of house and land;
 And of his tongue and of his hand, also;
 And made him burn his book, right then, oho!
 And when I had thus gathered unto me
 Masterfully, the entire sovereignty,
 And he had said: 'My own true wedded wife,
 Do as you please the term of all your life,
 Guard your own honour and keep fair my state'-
 After that day we never had debate.
 God help me now, I was to him as kind
 As any wife from Denmark unto Ind,
 And also true, and so was he to me.
 I pray to God, Who sits in majesty,
 To bless his soul, out of His mercy dear!
 Now will I tell my tale, if you will hear."

BEHOLD THE WORDS
 BETWEEN THE SUMMONER,
 AND THE FRIAR

The friar laughed when he had heard all this.
 "Now dame," said he, "so have I joy or bliss
 This is a long preamble to a tale!"
 And when the summoner heard this friar's hail,
 "Lo," said the summoner, "by God's arms two!
 A friar will always interfere, mark you.
 Behold, good men, a housefly and a friar
 Will fall in every dish and matters higher.
 Why speak of preambles; you in your gown?
 What! Amble, trot, hold peace, or go sit down;
 You hinder our diversion thus to inquire."
 "Aye, say you so, sir summoner?" said the friar,
 "Now by my faith I will, before I go,
 Tell of a summoner such a tale, or so,
 That all the folk shall laugh who're in this place'
 "Otherwise, friar, I beshrew your face,"
 Replied this summoner, "and beshrew me
 If I do not tell tales here, two or three,
 Of friars ere I come to Sittingbourne,
 That certainly will give you cause to mourn,
 For well I know your patience will be gone."

Our host cried out, "Now peace, and that anon!"
 And said he: "Let the woman tell her tale.
 You act like people who are drunk with ale.
 Do, lady, tell your tale, and that is best."
 "All ready, sir," said she, "as you request,
 If I have license of this worthy friar."
 "Yes, dame," said he, "to hear you's my desire."
 HERE THE WIFE OF BATH ENDS HER PROLOGUE

THE TALE OF THE WIFE OF BATH

Now in the olden days of King Arthur,
 Of whom the Britons speak with great honour,
 All this wide land was land of faery.
 The elf-queen, with her jolly company,
 Danced oftentimes on many a green mead;
 This was the old opinion, as I read.
 I speak of many hundred years ago;
 But now no man can see the elves, you know.
 For now the so-great charity and prayers
 Of limiters and other holy friars
 That do infest each land and every stream
 As thick as motes are in a bright sunbeam,
 Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies' bowers,
 Cities and towns and castles and high towers,
 Manors and barns and stables, aye and dairies-
 This causes it that there are now no fairies.
 For where was wont to walk full many an elf,
 Right there walks now the limiter himself
 In noons and afternoons and in mornings,
 Saying his matins and such holy things,
 As he goes round his district in his gown.
 Women may now go safely up and down,
 In every copse or under every tree;
 There is no other incubus, than he,
 And would do them nothing but dishonour.
 And so befell it that this King Arthur
 Had at his court a lusty bachelor
 Who, on a day, came riding from river;
 And happened that, alone as she was born,
 He saw a maiden walking through the corn,
 From whom, in spite of all she did and said,

Straightway by force he took her maidenhead;
 For which violation was there such clamour,
 And such appealing unto King Arthur,
 That soon condemned was this knight to be dead
 By course of law, and should have lost his head,
 Peradventure, such being the statute then;
 But that the other ladies and the queen
 So long prayed of the king to show him grace,
 He granted life, at last, in the law's place,
 And gave him to the queen, as she should will,
 Whether she'd save him, or his blood should spill.
 The queen she thanked the king with all her might,
 And after this, thus spoke she to the knight,
 When she'd an opportunity, one day:
 "You stand yet," said she, "in such poor a way
 That for your life you've no security.
 I'll grant you life if you can tell to me
 What thing it is that women most desire.
 Be wise, and keep your neck from iron dire!
 And if you cannot tell it me anon,
 Then will I give you license to be gone
 A twelvemonth and a day, to search and learn
 Sufficient answer in this grave concern.
 And your knight's word I'll have, ere forth you pace,
 To yield your body to me in this place."
 Grieved was this knight, and sorrowfully he sighed;
 But there! he could not do as pleased his pride.
 And at the last he chose that he would wend
 And come again upon the twelvemonth's end,
 With such an answer as God might purvey;
 And so he took his leave and went his way.
 He sought out every house and every place
 Wherein he hoped to find that he had grace
 To learn what women love the most of all;
 But nowhere ever did it him befall
 To find, upon the question stated here,
 Two, persons who agreed with statement clear.
 Some said that women all loved best riches,
 Some said, fair fame, and some said, prettiness;
 Some, rich array, some said 'twas lust abed
 And often to be widowed and re-wed.

Some said that our poor hearts are aye most eased
 When we have been most flattered and thus pleased
 And he went near the truth, I will not lie;
 A man may win us best with flattery;
 And with attentions and with busyness
 We're often limed, the greater and the less.
 And some say, too, that we do love the best
 To be quite free to do our own behest,
 And that no man reprove us for our vice,
 But saying we are wise, take our advice.
 For truly there is no one of us all,
 If anyone shall rub us on a gall,
 That will not kick because he tells the truth.
 Try, and he'll find, who does so, I say sooth.
 No matter how much vice we have within,
 We would be held for wise and clean of sin.
 And some folk say that great delight have we
 To be held constant, also trustworthy,
 And on one purpose steadfastly to dwell,
 And not betray a thing that men may tell.
 But that tale is not worth a rake's handle;
 By God, we women can no thing conceal,
 As witness Midas. Would you hear the tale?
 Ovid, among some other matters small,
 Said Midas had beneath his long curled hair,
 Two ass's ears that grew in secret there,
 The which defect he hid, as best he might,
 Full cunningly from every person's sight,
 And, save his wife, no one knew of it, no.
 He loved her most, and trusted her also;
 And he prayed of her that to no creature
 She'd tell of his disfigurement impure.
 She swore him: Nay, for all this world to win
 She would do no such villainy or sin
 And cause her husband have so foul a name;
 Nor would she tell it for her own deep shame.
 Nevertheless, she thought she would have died
 Because so long the secret must she hide;
 It seemed to swell so big about her heart
 That some word from her mouth must surely start;
 And since she dared to tell it to no man,

Down to a marsh, that lay hard by, she ran;
 Till she came there her heart was all afire,
 And as a bittern booms in the quagmire,
 She laid her mouth low to the water down:
 "Betray me not, you sounding water blown,"
 Said she, "I tell it to none else but you:
 Long ears like asses' has my husband two!
 Now is my heart at ease, since that is out;
 I could no longer keep it, there's no doubt."
 Here may you see, though for a while we bide,
 Yet out it must; no secret can we hide.
 The rest of all this tale, if you would hear,
 Read Ovid: in his book does it appear.
 This knight my tale is chiefly told about
 When what he went for he could not find out,
 That is, the thing that women love the best,
 Most saddened was the spirit in his breast;
 But home he goes, he could no more delay.
 The day was come when home he turned his way;
 And on his way it chanced that he should ride
 In all his care, beneath a forest's side,
 And there he saw, a-dancing him before,
 Full four and twenty ladies, maybe more;
 Toward which dance eagerly did he turn
 In hope that there some wisdom he should learn.
 But truly, ere he came upon them there,
 The dancers vanished all, he knew not where.
 No creature saw he that gave sign of life,
 Save, on the greensward sitting, an old wife;
 A fouler person could no man devise.
 Before the knight this old wife did arise,
 And said: "Sir knight, hence lies no travelled way.
 Tell me what thing you seek, and by your fay.
 Perchance you'll find it may the better be;
 These ancient folk know many things," said she.
 "Dear mother," said this knight assuredly,
 "I am but dead, save I can tell, truly,
 What thing it is that women most desire;
 Could you inform me, I'd pay well your hire."
 "Plight me your troth here, hand in hand," said she,
 "That you will do, whatever it may be,

The thing I ask if it lie in your might;
 And I'll give you your answer ere the night."
 "Have here my word," said he. "That thing I grant."
 "Then," said the crone, "of this I make my vaunt,
 Your life is safe; and I will stand thereby,
 Upon my life, the queen will say as I.
 Let's see which is the proudest of them all
 That wears upon her hair kerchief or caul,
 Shall dare say no to that which I shall teach;
 Let us go now and without longer speech."
 Then whispered she a sentence in his ear,
 And bade him to be glad and have no fear.
 When they were come unto the court, this knight
 Said he had kept his promise as was right,
 And ready was his answer, as he said.
 Full many a noble wife, and many a maid,
 And many a widow, since they are so wise,
 The queen herself sitting as high justice,
 Assembled were, his answer there to hear;
 And then the knight was bidden to appear.
 Command was given for silence in the hall,
 And that the knight should tell before them all
 What thing all worldly women love the best.
 This knight did not stand dumb, as does a beast,
 But to this question presently answered
 With manly voice, so that the whole court heard:
 "My liege lady, generally," said he,
 "Women desire to have the sovereignty
 As well upon their husband as their love,
 And to have mastery their man above;
 This thing you most desire, though me you kill
 Do as you please, I am here at your will."
 In all the court there was no wife or maid
 Or widow that denied the thing he said,
 But all held, he was worthy to have life.
 And with that word up started the old wife
 Whom he had seen a-sitting on the green.
 "Mercy," cried she, "my sovereign lady queen!
 Before the court's dismissed, give me my right.
 'Twas I who taught the answer to this knight;
 For which he did plight troth to me, out there,

That the first thing I should of him require
 He would do that, if it lay in his might.
 Before the court, now, pray I you, sir knight,"
 Said she, "that you will take me for your wife;
 For well you know that I have saved your life.
 If this be false, say nay, upon your fay!"
 This knight replied: "Alas and welaway!
 That I so promised I will not protest.
 But for God's love pray make a new request.
 Take all my wealth and let my body go."
 "Nay then," said she, "beshrew us if I do!
 For though I may be foul and old and poor,
 I will not, for all metal and all ore
 That from the earth is dug or lies above,
 Be aught except your wife and your true love."
 "My love?" cried he, "nay, rather my damnation!
 Alas! that any of my race and station
 Should ever so dishonoured foully be!"
 But all for naught; the end was this, that he
 Was so constrained he needs must go and wed,
 And take his ancient wife and go to bed.
 Now, peradventure, would some men say here,
 That, of my negligence, I take no care
 To tell you of the joy and all the array
 That at the wedding feast were seen that day.
 Make a brief answer to this thing I shall;
 I say, there was no joy or feast at all;
 There was but heaviness and grievous sorrow;
 For privately he wedded on the morrow,
 And all day, then, he hid him like an owl;
 So sad he was, his old wife looked so foul.
 Great was the woe the knight had in his thought
 When he, with her, to marriage bed was brought;
 He rolled about and turned him to and fro.
 His old wife lay there, always smiling so,
 And said: "O my dear husband, ben'cite!
 Fares every knight with wife as you with me?
 Is this the custom in King Arthur's house?
 Are knights of his all so fastidious?
 I am your own true love and, more, your wife;
 And I am she who saved your very life;

And truly, since I've never done you wrong,
 Why do you treat me so, this first night long?
 You act as does a man who's lost his wit;
 What is my fault? For God's love tell me it,
 And it shall be amended, if I may."
 "Amended!" cried this knight, "Alas, nay, nay!
 It will not be amended ever, no!
 You are so loathsome, and so old also,
 And therewith of so low a race were born,
 It's little wonder that I toss and turn.
 Would God my heart would break within my breast!"
 "Is this," asked she, "the cause of your unrest?"
 "Yes, truly," said he, "and no wonder 'tis."
 "Now, sir," said she, "I could amend all this,
 If I but would, and that within days three,
 If you would bear yourself well towards me.
 "But since you speak of such gentility
 As is descended from old wealth, till ye
 Claim that for that you should be gentlemen,
 I hold such arrogance not worth a hen.
 Find him who is most virtuous alway,
 Alone or publicly, and most tries aye
 To do whatever noble deeds he can,
 And take him for the greatest gentleman.
 Christ wills we claim from Him gentility,
 Not from ancestors of landocracy.
 For though they give us all their heritage,
 For which we claim to be of high lineage,
 Yet can they not bequeath, in anything,
 To any of us, their virtuous living,
 That made men say they had gentility,
 And bade us follow them in like degree.
 "Well does that poet wise of great Florence,
 Called Dante, speak his mind in this sentence;
 Somewhat like this may it translated be:
 'Rarely unto the branches of the tree
 Doth human worth mount up: and so ordains
 He Who bestows it; to Him it pertains.'
 For of our fathers may we nothing claim
 But temporal things, that man may hurt and maim
 "And everyone knows this as well as I,

If nobleness were implanted naturally
 Within a certain lineage, down the line,
 In private and in public, I opine,
 The ways of gentleness they'd alway show
 And never fall to vice and conduct low.
 "Take fire and carry it in the darkest house
 Between here and the Mount of Caucasus,
 And let men shut the doors and from them turn;
 Yet will the fire as fairly blaze and burn
 As twenty thousand men did it behold;
 Its nature and its office it will hold,
 On peril of my life, until it die.
 "From this you see that true gentility
 Is not allied to wealth a man may own,
 Since folk do not their deeds, as may be shown,
 As does the fire, according to its kind.
 For God knows that men may full often find
 A lord's son doing shame and villainy;
 And he that prizes his gentility
 In being born of some old noble house,
 With ancestors both noble and virtuous,
 But will himself do naught of noble deeds
 Nor follow him to whose name he succeeds,
 He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
 For acting churlish makes a man a churl.
 Gentility is not just the renown
 Of ancestors who have some greatness shown,
 In which you have no portion of your own.
 Your own gentility comes from God alone;
 Thence comes our true nobility by grace,
 It was not willed us with our rank and place
 "Think how noble, as says Valerius,
 Was that same Tullius Hostilius,
 Who out of poverty rose to high estate.
 Seneca and Boethius inculcate,
 Expressly (and no doubt it thus proceeds),
 That he is noble who does noble deeds;
 And therefore, husband dear, I thus conclude:
 Although my ancestors mayhap were rude,
 Yet may the High Lord God, and so hope I,
 Grant me the grace to live right virtuously.

Then I'll be gentle when I do begin
 To live in virtue and to do no sin.
 "And when you me reproach for poverty,
 The High God, in Whom we believe, say I,
 In voluntary poverty lived His life.
 And surely every man, or maid, or wife
 May understand that Jesus, Heaven's King,
 Would not have chosen vileness of living.
 Glad poverty's an honest thing, that's plain,
 Which Seneca and other clerks maintain.
 Whoso will be content with poverty,
 I hold him rich, though not a shirt has he.
 And he that covets much is a poor wight,
 For he would gain what's all beyond his might,
 But he that has not, nor desires to have,
 Is rich, although you hold him but a knave.
 "True poverty, it sings right naturally;
 Juvenal gaily says of poverty:
 'The poor man, when he walks along the way,
 Before the robbers he may sing and play.'
 Poverty's odious good, and, as I guess,
 It is a stimulant to busyness;
 A great improver, too, of sapience
 In him that takes it all with due patience.
 Poverty's this, though it seem misery-
 Its quality may none dispute, say I.
 Poverty often, when a man is low,
 Makes him his God and even himself to know.
 And poverty's an eye-glass, seems to me,
 Through which a man his loyal friends may see.
 Since you've received no injury from me,
 Then why reproach me for my poverty.
 "Now, sir, with age you have upbraided me;
 And truly, sir, though no authority
 Were in a book, you gentles of honour
 Say that men should the aged show favour,
 And call him father, of your gentleness;
 And authors could I find for this, I guess.
 "Now since you say that I am foul and old,
 Then fear you not to be made a cuckold;
 For dirt and age, as prosperous I may be,

Are mighty wardens over chastity.
 Nevertheless, since I know your delight,
 I'll satisfy your worldly appetite.
 "Choose, now," said she, "one of these two things, aye,
 To have me foul and old until I die,
 And be to you a true and humble wife,
 And never anger you in all my life;
 Or else to have me young and very fair
 And take your chance with those who will repair
 Unto your house, and all because of me,
 Or in some other place, as well may be.
 Now choose which you like better and reply."
 This knight considered, and did sorely sigh,
 But at the last replied as you shall hear:
 "My lady and my love, and wife so dear,
 I put myself in your wise governing;
 Do you choose which may be the more pleasing,
 And bring most honour to you, and me also.
 I care not which it be of these things two;
 For if you like it, that suffices me."
 "Then have I got of you the mastery,
 Since I may choose and govern, in earnest?"
 "Yes, truly, wife," said he, "I hold that best."
 "Kiss me," said she, "we'll be no longer wroth,
 For by my truth, to you I will be both;
 That is to say, I'll be both good and fair.
 I pray God I go mad, and so declare,
 If I be not to you as good and true
 As ever wife was since the world was new.
 And, save I be, at dawn, as fairly seen
 As any lady, empress, or great queen
 That is between the east and the far west,
 Do with my life and death as you like best.
 Throw back the curtain and see how it is."
 And when the knight saw verily all this,
 That she so very fair was, and young too,
 For joy he clasped her in his strong arms two,
 His heart bathed in a bath of utter bliss;
 A thousand times, all in a row, he'd kiss.
 And she obeyed his wish in everything
 That might give pleasure to his love-liking.

And thus they lived unto their lives' fair end,
 In perfect joy; and Jesus to us send
 Meek husbands, and young ones, and fresh in bed,
 And good luck to outlive them that we wed.
 And I pray Jesus to cut short the lives
 Of those who'll not be governed by their wives;
 And old and querulous niggards with their pence,
 And send them soon a mortal pestilence!
 HERE ENDS THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE